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George Beveridge

## The CIA tarnishes the innocent

The only thing wrong with the CIA's pledge to stop using news correspondents as paid sources of intelligence overseas is that the practice should have been halted long ago. This is an alliance in which a free press has no rightful place. And the agency's refusal to identify news people who have served as the CIA's eyes and ears in the past — or are still doing so — leaves some unsettling questions.

One result, as *The Star* has seen in recent weeks, is that the professional integrity of a host of innocent foreign correspondents now seems destined to remain indefinitely under a cloud of suspicion.

On Feb. 9, in the wake of the latest disclosures on CIA-news ties abroad, CIA Chief George Bush announced two decisions:

① Effective immediately, he said, the CIA "will not enter any paid or contractual relationships with any full-time or part-time news correspondents" accredited by news outlets in the United States.

② In a tacit admission of what's been going on, Bush said, the CIA also will move to "bring existing relationships with individuals in these groups into conformity with the new policy."

The "existing relationships," it appears, involve largely, if not entirely, part-time correspondents, or "stringers." (Newspaper stringers, as distinguished

from full-time, salaried employees, are reporters who are paid for individual articles; often, they service several publications at the same time.)

But the efforts of *The Star* and other newspapers to check out their "stringer lists" with the CIA hit a stone wall. So *The Star*, thwarted on that front, last month shot off to more than 20 of its regular stringers a letter which read, in part, as follows:

"As you may know, it has been acknowledged here by the CIA that some stringers for unidentified U.S. news agencies have been involved with the CIA in ways that go beyond the normal give-and-take of ordinary journalistic activity. This obviously is contrary to our policy.

"Therefore, if you have or in the past have had such a connection — or have been part of any program involving U.S. government agencies, reimbursed or not — we would like to know about it."

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The Star's ombudsman.

Well, that letter did not call for a response in the absence of such involvements. But voluntary disavowals (10 to date) have been rolling in anyway. And most of the comments reach substantially beyond disavowals.

Stringer Tony Avirgan,

writing from Tanzania, for example, strongly urged *The Star* to continue to "push the CIA to reveal the names of all the journalists who have worked for U.S. intelligence agencies."

"Only when this is done," he said, "will those of us who are engaged in honest journalism be able to partially remove the cloak of suspicion and get on with our work."

From Tehran, stringer Ralph Joseph wrote that such involvements "foul up the entire profession and cast suspicion on all members of the press," to their detriment in dealing with foreign officials.

From Munich, "categorically" denying relationships with the CIA or any other government agency, stringer John Dornberg wrote that the CIA aspersions "were of such a blanket nature" that "I am sufficiently incensed to examine the possibilities of a slander or defamation of character suit."

There is more of the same — and the anger, it seems to me, is justified.

If those views are shared by the press as a whole, however, it is not readily apparent. For the most part the pressures on the CIA for disclosure have simply gone away. Indeed, on two occasions, the newspaper trade journal, *Editor & Publisher*, has opposed it.

"We believe the release of such information," *E&P* said in its Feb. 21 issue,

"would accomplish little except harm the reputations of the persons named and the news organizations for which they worked. It may be charitable, but we believe it is accurate, to say that most of those who helped the CIA and other government agencies in the past, whether journalists or not, did so for patriotic reasons. Times have changed, and patriotism of this kind is misunderstood today."

Well, times have changed, and the *E&P*-attributed motives of patriotism, I suspect, are in the vast majority of cases right.

But there is little consolation in that for the vast majority of news correspondents around the world who, in those earlier times, refrained from such involvements and got on with their jobs of covering the news.

For whatever motives, newsmen who have doubled as CIA agents bear a burden of culpability as heavy as, if not heavier than, that of the intelligence agency which recruited them. And it occurs to me that the over-all response of the press in that regard is just a mite out of kilter with its zeal in exposing the participation of all manner of other people in intelligence activities.

Charity is surely a cardinal virtue. For newspapers, especially, even-handedness is, too.